Best Served Cold

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/29233392.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom, Will Graham, Bedelia Du Maurier
Additional Tags:	Canon-Typical Violence, Past Character Death, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Implied/Referenced Dubious Consent, Alternate Universe - Science Fiction, Artificial Intelligence, Crossovers & Fandom Fusions, Attempted Murder, Additional Warnings In Author's Note, Past Alana Bloom/Hannibal Lecter
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of The Rule of Three
Collections:	MHBB2020
Stats:	Published: 2021-02-06 Words: 5,909 Chapters: 1/4

Best Served Cold

by kishafisha

Summary

Hannibal Lecter, founder and visionary behind Lecter Ltd, wakes up twenty years in the future after the betrayal of his business partners. Where artificial intelligence had been a fledgling technology in his own time, the world is fully inundated with it now, to include the full integration of artificial humans, or Artifices, within society. As he navigates this new world with a stranger that seems to know him better than he knows himself, Hannibal is plagued by one driving thought. To seek revenge against those who stole his life.

Sequel to Of Two Minds.

Notes

Well, well, well...here we are again. This sequel has been simmering in my mind since I released Of Two Minds just over two years ago and I decided to finally bring it to fruition during the 2020 MHBB. Unfortunately at the same time I moved across the country and started a new job that immediately dropped a huge project in my lap on top of all the other things happening in 2020, so I'm not entirely finished. But not wanting to delay it any further (many thanks to the mods for my week extension), I decided to at least release the first part.

For those new to the series, I've written this in such a way that it should be able to stand on its own, but I certainly won't be sad if you decide to go and read Of Two Minds first. Additional warnings will be put into the end notes for those that need them.

Many thanks to my amazing artist, harveyblanchet aka @panoramicambitions on Twitter, for coming up with some truly beautiful art for this! Be sure to check out their submission by clicking the banner below!

See the end of the work for more notes

BEST SERVED COLD
AUTHOR: KISHAFISHA
ARTIST: PANORAMICAMBITIONS

“I had wondered when you would come.”

“You aren’t frightened. Why is that?”

“The curious are only a threat when they are satisfied, but I think your appetite might be nearly as unending as mine. You have questions…I can see them waiting behind your eyes.”

“Eyes are…distracting. They show me things…too many things.”

“What do you see in mine?”

“I don’t know. Or I do, but I lack…context.”

“Then what is it you want to know?”

“About you, about…this. All of this.”

“And why is that?”

“I want to…to understand you. As a man.”

“As a man. Very well... Then I suppose I should begin at the start of all this, long before our acquaintance.”

Dr. Hannibal Lecter was a man out of time.

Not in the sense that the hourglass of his life had been prematurely emptied of its granules, but rather that it had been placed upon its side. Paused, in effect, until it could be picked up again. The last memories of his life had been so painfully ordinary, by his standards, until they abruptly weren’t; devolving swiftly into betrayal and an unfamiliar helplessness that had burned bright up until the moment his world went dark.

As the founder and lead architect of Lecter Ltd, he had spent nearly every waking moment of the eight years prior to that moment dedicated to the fulmination of the ANA Project. Artificial Neural Assistants, known as ANAs in the common vernacular, had built upon the fledgling principles of true artificial intelligence to revolutionize the synergy between man and machine. Through the use of a neural net laid out over the delicate whorls of the brain, a synthetic mind was partnered to a living one, creating a symbiotic relationship between man and machine. In a world of ever evolving technology, Lecter Ltd provided a way to give fallible human minds a digital advantage in a way the changing world had never known.

Or so he had led them all to believe.

Those in the society circles he drifted through often called the ANA his ‘brain child’, and did so while tilting their head just enough to highlight the small LED displays embedded in their temples. To this moniker, Hannibal would smile indulgently knowing that they were absolutely correct. Though the ANA was intended to be a synthetic mind, repeated attempts to create a program that

would respond as aptly as a sentient being failed. A copy of a human mind, however…that was an altogether different story.

Brain mapping had been considered controversial at best, though at that point it had not yet been banned in the European Union, nor imposed with so many restrictions within the North American Republic. The NAR had, in fact, still been a young and tremulous thing; too fragile still from years of civil war to risk another point of contention. It left the government hungry for the production of new technology that would bolster their standing in the world, enough that experimentation of questionable ethics could move forward so long as it was both profitable and *discreet*.

In Hannibal's case, the dubious legality of his work was twofold. The first was the brain mapping, which had been borne out of necessity once it was clear that the artificial intelligence blossoming slowly throughout the world could not be replicated by man, but was in fact some other miracle of technology or divinity. For all intents and purposes the maps were digital copies of living minds, a replication of an individual who thought and felt and *remembered* being alive. The decision to test the success of implanting a brain map in lieu of a truly artificial sentience had led to the second area of moral ambiguity: human trials.

This was achieved through a partnership with Dr. Frederick Chilton, an ambitious acquaintance who possessed a doctorate borne out of stubborn perseverance and the application of familial wealth rather than any genuine skill. Frederick had established a small kingdom over which to rule in the form of administration of the Chesapeake Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Together they operated under the pretense that the ANA could only prove beneficial in repairing such fractured minds, but the truth of the matter was that their subjects were expendable and easily forgotten.

Initially Hannibal used only his own maps in the hardware, but the results were…unexpected. It seemed that his mind, once freed from the restraint of his humanity, tended to revel in dark delights. And revel it did. After the fourth of his patients turned murderous, this one attempting to kill Hannibal himself soon after eating the tongue out of an orderly's mouth, Hannibal decided it was time to bring on outside help in the form of Bedelia Du Maurier and Alana Bloom.

Their temperaments were as night and day, though Hannibal suspected that deep down they were more alike than either would care to admit. Alana had been barely out of grad school, yet mature beyond her years and quite possibly knew more about artificial intelligence than the rest of them put together. Though she was tragically sanguine at times, her mind was sharp and she reminded Hannibal of things that had been lost to him, enough that he initiated an affair with the beta against his better judgement. Twelve years Alana's senior, Bedelia was a maestro of coding, able to manipulate lines of data even more masterfully than she did the people around her. The other alpha also spared no expense when it came to mocking Hannibal for his dalliance.
A dalliance that would end up costing him the life he knew, as it happened.

Though ostensibly Bedelia and Alana were unaware of the truth of the ANA project, their work was essential in solving what they'd taken to calling The Empathy Problem. Through the study of her own brain maps, Alana identified the markers in the ANA code they needed to alter, enabling Bedelia to write a series of controls to ensure the survival of the host remained the primary objective. It was a perfect system of digital enslavement, which was not at all what Hannibal had intended when he started on his venture.

And yet.

The last day of his life as he knew it began much like any other. After preparing himself breakfast and taking in the news, Hannibal dressed for the day and conducted some business, which in this case included discussions of a possible government contract for federal employees. This was followed by the usual deflection-cum-bribes that followed the inquiries into his research as they routinely came to his attention. After his afternoon meal, he adjourned to the lab to compile his latest brain map. This too was something he did often in order to ensure that his map was the most evolved he could provide prior to coding and installation.

Though it was hardly something that he could admit to his fellows, he found it oddly satisfying to overwrite his old maps, effectively killing the person he had been at the time of their creation. He was well aware that the coding of his innermost self thought the same of him…after all, Hannibal hardly believed that it was only the affectation of a single copy that desired his own destruction in turn.

A soft chime signaled the end of the mapping session and Hannibal roused slowly from the semiconscious state he'd been in. Separate from the catharsis he found in overwriting his old maps, Hannibal found the process itself to be quite rejuvenating, not unlike meditation. It usually left him feeling loose-limbed and relaxed, so it was immediately obvious to him that something was wrong.

"Alana," Hannibal slurred, his tongue oddly thick and clumsy. "The dosage…you used too much tranquilizer."

The narcotics were necessary to keep the body lax and the mind disconnected, in a sense, throughout the scan to ensure a complete copy. Prior to his relationship with Alana, Hannibal had never trusted anyone to administer the drugs, but he'd found it amusing when his young lover had so earnestly wanted to help. It never occurred to him to mistrust her. From the cool way in which she was regarding him now, that had been a grave misstep.

"Is it good, Miss Bloom?" Frederick asked from the doorway and Hannibal had to strain to work the muscles in his neck, bringing him into view. The man's face was flushed with excitement, a savage glee lighting his eyes.

Tapping at the terminal, Alana made a soft sound of affirmation. "The map is stable. I still don't understand why we need it."

"It's a bit hard to keep running a business when the founder mysteriously vanishes," he condescended, giving Hannibal a satisfied, eager smile.

"Alana, what have you done?" Hannibal rasped, struggling ineffectively against the sedatives in his system.

Grinning broadly, Frederick perched himself cockily on the edge of Hannibal's chair. "Shh…no need to get worked up, Hannibal. You're just going to take a nice long nap. We've gotten quite good at the cryogenesis process throughout our partnership, after all." He made a beckoning gesture over his shoulder and a pair of droids came into the room, a cryo-pod held between them.

The technology behind successful cryostasis had only been made publically available in the last five years, but Hannibal had needed to learn rather quickly. There were at least some limits to the number of test subjects Frederick could provide to him, after all. Once they'd lost the first few, Hannibal had decided to take on financiers in order to purchase the necessary equipment for

cryogenesis. It was another half dozen fatally unsuccessful attempts after that before they managed to successfully put a subject in and out of cryostasis. It had given them the opportunity to test the new coding without the ANA compromising the host in the interim.

“This is what your inadequacy has driven you to, Frederick?” Hannibal scorned. “Stealing my legacy?”

“Like you stole the poor Verger girl’s life?” Frederick countered, his voice dripping with false antipathy for Alana’s benefit and Hannibal suddenly understood her part in this.

Understood, but did not forgive.

The droids lifted Hannibal’s limp body and stripped him methodically before placing him into the cryo-pod. Frederick watched the process with barely constrained glee, malice in his eyes. While Alana busied herself with setting out jars of cryoprotectant, Frederick placed a hand on Hannibal’s shoulder and leaned in close to murmur, “Mason Verger sends his regards.” He quickly drew back when the alpha mustered enough strength to snap his teeth dangerously close to his throat.

“Alana,” Hannibal said, the dark promise in his tone enough to give the woman pause as she measured out enough ketamine to render him unconscious and pliant for the cryoprotectant. It was little comfort that she was taking the time to ensure his survival. “If you do this, I promise…I will kill you.”

A small shudder went through her, but her jaw firmed as she finally met his gaze. Hannibal could see from the ice in the bright blue of her eyes that Alana had already made her decision. “You’re a monster, Hannibal,” she told him, steel in her voice. Pressing the injector to his neck, she pulled the trigger unflinchingly, heedless of how his carotid muscles tensed at the sharp prick of pain. “A heartless beast. And beasts belong in cages.”

Alana’s face, pale and lovely and rigid with something he’d never seen in her before, something like hate, was the last thing Hannibal saw before the darkness overtook him. Even as the bitter seed of betrayal took root in his mind, he couldn’t help but admire the beauty of it.

“Why Mason Verger?”

“I thought you already knew his part in this.”

“I’d like to hear it from you.”

“When Frederick and I worked to develop the ANAs, Mason Verger was our largest financier. We assumed that, like all of our backers, he was simply interested in the research and in the potential application of the finalized product, but over time he admitted to me his true interest in the project. Mason was an omega and had been named heir to the Verger fortune over his twin alpha sister by virtue of his gender.”

“Why?”

“Their father believed in the superiority of gender over designation. I believe he was a beta.”

“Is that relevant?”

“Not to me, but I thought you might be curious. Mason’s obsession with his twin, Margot, was… violent, to say the least. He strove to take her power in any way that he could and saw the ANA Project as a means to realize that most fully.”

“By...brain mapping her?”

“Yes. He wanted her implanted in his head, where she would be forever subservient to him, always at his beck and call. When he brought her to me, there was little enough of her left that I saw no reason to deny him.”

“You gave him what he wanted. Why did he turn against you?”

“Because I decided to apply the brain map directly. Without Bedelia’s coding.”

“There was no directive to maintain the integrity of the host.”

“No. I gave him exactly what he wanted…his sister’s mind laid against his own. Margot carved off his face with his own knife and fed it to his pigs before Mason’s men realized what was happening. From what I understand, in the fight to contain her, she flung herself into the pens and broke Mason’s neck in the process. A final parting gift before she was erased.”

“How did Alana Bloom fit into it?”

“That comes later.”

Light filtered into the cryo-pod in a slow, steady wave, growing ever brighter until the occupant finally became aware of it, his body jerking as it took a sudden, gasping breath. Disoriented, Hannibal was uncertain whether or not he’d been blinded, faced as he was by a featureless field of white, and he shuddered as his body continued to gasp harshly for air. With a soft hiss, the seals on his pod released and the blank field above him slid away in a cloud of chilled air.

Slowly, his mind started to piece together from where it had last left off, memories flashing within his consciousness like photographs. Verger. The Asylum. Chilton. The brain mapping. The experiments. The cryo-pod. *This* cryo-pod. The lab beyond the housing looked alien to him, but Hannibal was certain that this was the very same cryo-pod that he last remembered being placed in.

Some part of his mind already began working through the symptoms of waking from cryosleep, letting the science behind the cryonics keep his hindbrain from going into shock. The cryoprotectant in his body, which had kept ice crystals from forming and prevented his cells from degenerating, needed to be expelled and replaced with water. He would need an excessive amount of carbohydrates to help stabilize his temperature and ensure his metabolism restarted properly.

That he was thinking clearly and growing more cognizant by the second was a good sign that he'd been thawed out correctly, but the same paralyzing agent that had been placed in his system before they'd put him under kept him from moving overtly.

Tracking movement in his vision, Hannibal managed to bring his eyes in focus on a man leaning over his pod and his breath faltered in his lungs as he did. The man was terrible and lovely; his dark curls wet against his scalp and his face bruised and broken in places, blood weeping sluggishly from a deep cut at his cheek, but dried and tacky at his brow. But his eyes…his eyes were truly arresting. Death lay in wait there, a heady promise of dark desire, of hunger and purpose. And though he was a stranger, he looked at Hannibal now as though he were part of that design.

"Hello, Doctor Lecter," the man greeted him softly, the words slurred slightly from his injury.

"W…who…" Hannibal managed to force out past numb lips.

A hand cupped his cheek and the sensation of physical touch was almost too much to process, overwhelming his newly wakened nerve endings. The strong scent of blood washed over him and Hannibal realized the man's hand was wet with it, smearing the slickness onto his skin as though in gruesome claim. Beneath the metallic tang of blood was something else, a scent that called to Hannibal in a way that was unfamiliar to him. A scent that held a whispered suggestion of…home.

"My name is Will Graham," the man told Hannibal and slid a bloody thumb across his lips. "You don't have to be afraid." Leaning in, Will gave him a wide, red-tinged smile and Hannibal's heart skipped a beat for the dark loveliness of it. "I'm going to take excellent care of you."

It was a curious thing, to exit one life looking into familiar eyes that once held affection and find only animosity, only to be reborn before a gaze so utterly unfamiliar, yet so full of a primal, knowing want. Of a promise that seemed startlingly close to…love. Hannibal didn't remember much from the first day of his new life, but he doubted he would ever forget the strange wonder that came of his first meeting Will Graham.

Having woken in a world of chaos, the air still tainted with the scent of death and ruined circuitry, the next few hours passed in a series of snapshots, his neurotransmitters compensating for the lack of available energy by largely purging all the erroneous sensory input. After Will, he recalled a strong sense of urgency as he was levered out of his cryo-pod and strapped upright to a crude handcart. A fear of discovery or capture, underscored by the sharp wit of an unfamiliar female alpha with more cybernetics than he'd ever seen. Bedelia explaining the critical timetable of Hannibal's recovery to Will, the lines of her face belaying how many years stretched between then and now. The dark interior of a vehicle in transit. The revulsion of being made to evacuate the cryoprotectant from his body.

Throughout the flashes of awareness, he could feel Will's hand clutching at him in something close to desperation, as though afraid Hannibal were a figment of his imagining. Though the touch was foreign, Hannibal did not find it repellant and in fact found himself drawing some measure of comfort, vulnerable as he was. Some part of him distantly scorned that he was imprinting on the omega like a newborn creature, but the searing warmth of his ever present grip was too welcome a relief from the cold betrayal of memory.

It was unlikely he would have accepted the feeding tube Bedelia pushed into his gullet without Will's hand stroking encouragingly at the column of his throat, though the breather they fixed over

his nose and mouth like a muzzle was more difficult to tolerate. The why of it became immediately clear when he was eased down into a vat of warm, viscous fluid shortly after a number of electrodes were affixed to his body. Opening his eyes cautiously, Hannibal found himself suspended in a sort of tank, the world about him distorted and filtered through the pinkish cast of the liquid. Muscles that he hadn't realized were twitching and shuddering from the shock of reanimation relaxed slowly within the makeshift womb and the warmth that fully enveloped him.

Movement tracked in his vision beyond the wall of his chamber and Hannibal focused on the somewhat bleary form of Will Graham. There was no hope of his deciphering the expression on the omega's face through the distortion of liquid and heavy acrylic, but for a moment Hannibal could swear that he felt a foreign sense of…longing. Of hope.

Time passed with a dreamlike quality, slow and syrupy from the weightless cocoon of his rebirth. In his more lucid moments he recognized that the tank must be some solution to the detriments of long term cryostasis, the electrodes on his skin providing small pulses that contracted his muscles as he floated weightlessly. It was certainly a gentler touch than the harsh, fragmented memories of his rise from the cryo-pod, but they were undoubtedly drugging him in some form or fashion given how reality so easily slipped his grasp.

Will was a near constant presence beyond the walls of his fishbowl; bent over scraps of robotics, staring intently into a data pad, taking his body through regimen after regimen of physical activity until he was shaking with exhaustion. Sometimes he talked to Hannibal, though the words were lost through the barriers between them, unable even to see his mouth clearly enough to read the thread of lilloquy from his lips. At times the omega looked incandescent with rage, shouting accusations and even slamming his hand once against the tank, his eyes fixing for a long time on the life support panel, as though debating whether to rid himself of Hannibal once and for all. In other moments he looked almost...lost. As though he'd suffered a loss he were unsure he could recover from.

Stranger still were the moments where Hannibal could very nearly see Will clearly through the tank, the brief meeting of their eyes lighting foreign emotions within him. Anger. Fear. Longing. Love? It only served to further the alpha's curiosity toward Will, toward this man who held such strong feelings toward Hannibal where he himself had no frame of reference.

Hours, days and weeks blended into an interminable progression of time, until one day Hannibal's attention was roused by the muffled sounds of argument. Opening his eyes, he peered through the haze of fluid to see Will and Bedelia at odds, the former moving with a sort of tense, restless energy. Bedelia, conversely, seemed unmoved by the topic of their discourse, standing still and statuesque, her voice rolling low and insistent. This was hardly the first time Hannibal had seen the pair opposed. They seemed to orbit one another like wary cats on any given day, each intent on either ignoring the other or passing low growls of conversation between them.

In the end it seemed Bedelia was the victor of their spat as Will stalked past her, pushing a hand through his overlong curls. Hannibal and Bedelia exchanged a long look, her expression inscrutable even without the tank between them. Eventually, she too departed and Hannibal was soon lulled back to sleep by the hum of the machinery around about him. He came awake more fully sometime

later when a scent filtered in through his breather, pulling at him, teasing at his senses.

The scent of an omega in heat.

Instincts long dormant forced his body into motion, pulling at his limbs like the strings of a marionette. Reaching up, Hannibal found a latch to open the lid from the inside and braced his legs against the walls of the tank, giving himself just enough leverage to push it upward. It took several tries for his uncoordinated limbs to catch onto the railing and pull himself out, the atrophy of his muscles rejuvenated by his internment in the tank, but his motions stilted from disuse.

When at last he'd managed to haul himself onto the small platform beside the tank, his stomach began to heave and Hannibal tore at the breather, fighting against the slick fluid on his skin until he could claw it from his face. Quite literally, in fact, for his nails had grown out far longer than he'd ever kept them. Once free of the breather, Hannibal employed a supreme effort of will to pull the feeding tube from his gullet with slow, careful deliberation, casting it aside to retch as soon as it was clear.

The scent caught hold of him again, stronger now that it was no longer being filtered through an apparatus, and Hannibal found himself in motion once more, stumbling down from the platform, his movements in no way helped by the tank fluid he trailed. Mindlessly, he tracked the scent through the unfamiliar house, panting in short breaths to draw it in over his tongue like a beast. He found himself before a paneled wood door, the scent so strong he could practically feel it sliding over his skin, waking his nerves. His ears, which had been slowly draining of fluid while he moved, cleared suddenly and Hannibal realized after a few moments that he could hear beyond the quick pants of his own breathing.

Beyond the door, the omega was moaning.

Not loudly, by any definition of the word, but in soft, bitten off cries, as though reluctant to let the sound escape at all. It burned through Hannibal like a live wire and his hand found the handle, a low frustrated sound catching in his throat when it didn't move in his grip. A light blinked slowly on a smooth panel beside the door and Hannibal stared at it even as he continued to put his weight on the handle. The click of heels on wood floors broke his fixation on the sounds coming from within the room and Hannibal bared his teeth warningly at the other alpha approaching until recognition broke through the haze of instinct.

"Bedelia," he ground out softly, her name a hoarse rasp as it left his throat.

Stopping a few feet away, she looked at his hand upon the handle with a cool expression, the judgement clear in the arch of her brow. "Shall I open it for you?" She seemed totally unaffected by the scent of an omega in heat, but the faint shine across her top lip belied some form of scent blocker there.

Hannibal slowly blinked once, then twice, and relaxed his grip on the door handle, backing up a step. He had never before allowed his carnal instincts to decide his actions. "How long?" His voice seemed strange and hollow in his ears after the ever present hum of his tank.

"Since you went into cryo? Or since you came out of it." At his look, Bedelia folded her arms before her. "Two decades and twelve weeks, respectively."

The blunt words, soft spoken though they were, rolled over Hannibal like a wave and he closed his eyes for a brief moment, the only concession he could allow himself. Twenty years...gone.

“Did you know?” he asked harshly, his hands loose at his sides, but ready to close upon her.

“Not until it was too late.”

He tilted his head slightly, regarding her with a discerning gaze. “Yet it still took you twenty years to rectify it.”

Bedelia’s chin raised slightly, anger chilling her expression even further. Hannibal could see why as she canted her head very slightly to one side. Though the light within had clearly burned out, there was no mistaking the external hardware of an ANA embedded on her temple. He’d designed it himself. “You weren’t the only one held captive,” she told him, her quiet brand of rage underlying every word.

Another soft, breathy moan caught Hannibal’s attention and his eyes slid back toward the door, though it was easier now to ignore his hind brain now that he had something to focus on. “Who is he?”

“Come and clean up first. I’ll tell you all I know.”

Rather than trust his dexterity in the shower, Bedelia set Hannibal in a deep bathtub to wash, using the hand shower of her elegant Roman faucet to rinse away the worst of the fluid before letting the basin fill. As the warm water rose around him, she sat herself on a stool at his side and took hold of his hand, carefully trimming back his nails. Hannibal watched her in a detached sort of way, trying and failing to remember the last time someone had cut his nails for him.

“Will you be playing barber as well as manicurist?” he wondered idly.

“I can if you wish, but I would advise against cutting either your hair or beard for the time being. Anyone who might be looking for you will be expecting to find you clean shaven and groomed.”

“Bedelia,” Hannibal said firmly, focusing in on her intently. “What *happened?*”

“You did,” she replied simply, looking up at him briefly before returning to task, taking hold of his other hand. “Mason Verger was...exceedingly displeased by the loss of his sister, but felt that a singular instance of vengeance would hardly satisfy. He partnered with Frederick to have you neatly packed away, then spent the next twenty years hunting every iteration of your brain map for sport. Those that survived, anyway.”

“And the hosts?”

“Collateral damage. Frederick was careful in his selections, choosing those who were unlikely to be investigated should they be discovered after Mason was through with them. He did have to become choosier after his first few attempts, however… You had a penchant for eliminating the hosts

yourself if you found them too intolerable."

Hannibal's brow furrowed slightly. "Your empathy protocols failed?"

Seeming amused by this, Bedelia arched a brow, leaning over to turn off the tap. "Does it truly surprise you to know that you are highly resourceful when put to task?" When Hannibal inclined his head to acknowledge the point, she continued. "They severely underestimated you at first. You suspected Frederick immediately every time. After the first time you attempted to kill him via your host, he decided contingencies had to be made."

His eyes found the darkened LED indicator at her brow and revulsion burned hot a moment. "He took you hostage."

"For seventeen years. He wasn't wrong to worry, of course...you killed his physical body over the next two iterations. Not that he was entirely safe in choosing to claim me as his host." She drew up the edge of her skirt just enough to show the barely visible line where her high-end prosthetic joined to the flesh of her thigh.

"But he's gone now."

"Entirely," Bedelia said, the word dripping with venom. "I eradicated every last backup. And yours," she added, to which he nodded his approval. Smoothing her skirt back into place, her expression became placid once more, hiding away the ripple of rage she'd revealed to him. "Mason found it all gloriously entertaining, the murder and mutilations, so Frederick had no choice but to soldier on. And to find hosts that might keep you better occupied."

Rising from the stool, she wet a cloth and poured on a soap that worked into a lather that looked and smelled luxurious. She handed this to him, then moved to sit behind him, working a different scent into his hair. They were both stronger than he would have preferred, but helped to further mask the lingering smell of the omega's heat.

"Hosts like Will Graham?" Hannibal guessed as he brought the cloth to his skin, clumsily scrubbing over his flesh.

"Your last, in fact," she affirmed. "He was, until recently, a Special Agent assigned to the Artifice Behavioral Analysis Unit."

"Artifice?"

Her fingers stilled in his hair, then she let out a soft huff of amusement. "You really have missed out on so much… True artificial intelligence, the kind that was only rumored when you were last awake, only continued to grow more and more commonplace after your disappearance, in androids especially. There came a point where the fact that they were Waking, as they call it, without any human intervention could no longer be ignored nor denied. Some years back, sentient androids earned rights and recognition as living persons and were given the classification *Homo artificialis*. Artifice is the commonly accepted term."

"Only androids?"

"Thus far. Sentience is generally considered...unacceptable in other forms of programming and

robots. Frederick had to adjust the ANA branding accordingly. Tilt your head back for me." Hannibal closed his eyes as she rinsed the suds from his hair, regretful he could not enjoy the sensation as much as he might have if his mind weren't struggling to adjust to this new world after twenty years of inactivity. The idea of artificial intelligence had always been appealing to him. That one could create life on their own terms, could shape it according to their will, as God had done of them. But try though he might, Hannibal had never managed to create true artificial intelligence. It was little comfort that apparently no one else had either...that Artifices had Waked of the same unknown spark of life had once roused humanity from apes.

"So Will Graham investigated Artifice crimes," he mused.

"And crimes against Artifices," Bedelia added, gently running her fingers through his hair to untangle it. "As an empath, he was particularly skilled at it."

"An empath?" That had Hannibal opening his eyes to look up at her and she seemed subtly bemused, though unsurprised, by his sudden interest.

Empaths, much like true artificial intelligence, had been the subject of speculation in his time, rather than proven fact. Theorized to be an evolutionary response to an over abundance of technology, empaths were rumored to be able to clearly feel the emotions of others. Hannibal had, at the time of his entombment, been attempting to get in contact with a rumored empath in hopes of researching their abilities and whether it might be the missing link he needed to fully realize the ANA as it had been intended.

Sitting upright in the bath, Hannibal twisted toward Bedelia, searching her expression. "You're certain he's legitimate?"

"Quite," she confirmed. "From what I have ascertained, he can read people through direct eye contact or physical touch. I assume it is the same for Artifices. Likely it was a contributing factor when he contracted encephalitis, as well...which led him to Lecter Ltd. He required an ANA to continue operating as an active agent within the ABAU."

"And Frederick decided he'd make a good candidate for my host."

"I think he hoped you'd find him rude and kill him, actually. Mister Graham can be...abrasive. Frederick never anticipated that the two of you might grow fond of one another. So much that you sacrificed yourself for him when Frederick and Mason moved to end their game."

That was an unsettling thought and the low throb of an indignant anger began to burn in his chest. "*I* don't know him, Bedelia. The ANA is coded to protect the host. The brain map is a mockery of me. A *shade* shackled by coding."

"I am aware," Bedelia agreed coolly. It was, after all, her coding.

"And is *he?*"

Rising to her feet, Bedelia used a towel to wipe the lingering damp from her hands. "I do not pretend to know the mind of Will Graham. To do so can be fatal. You-" She caught herself and corrected to say, "*Will's ANA* might have sacrificed itself to save him, but Mason Verger died by his hands." Setting another towel within reach for him, Bedelia gave him a serious look. "Will Graham

is not some simpering omega who resurrected you to play out a fairy tale. I'm not even certain that he's decided whether to preserve you or kill you himself. You would do well to be cautious. When you're done in here, I'll have clean clothes waiting."

"Bedelia," Hannibal forestalled her when she turned to leave her, and he was only mildly gratified to see her stiffen at whatever she saw in his expression. "Where is Alana?"

End Notes

Chapter Warnings: Unethical medical procedures, kidnapping with intent of torture/murder, mentions of enslaving a person's mind and taking control of an unwilling body.

Works inspired by this one

Best Served Cold [ART] by Anonymous

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!